

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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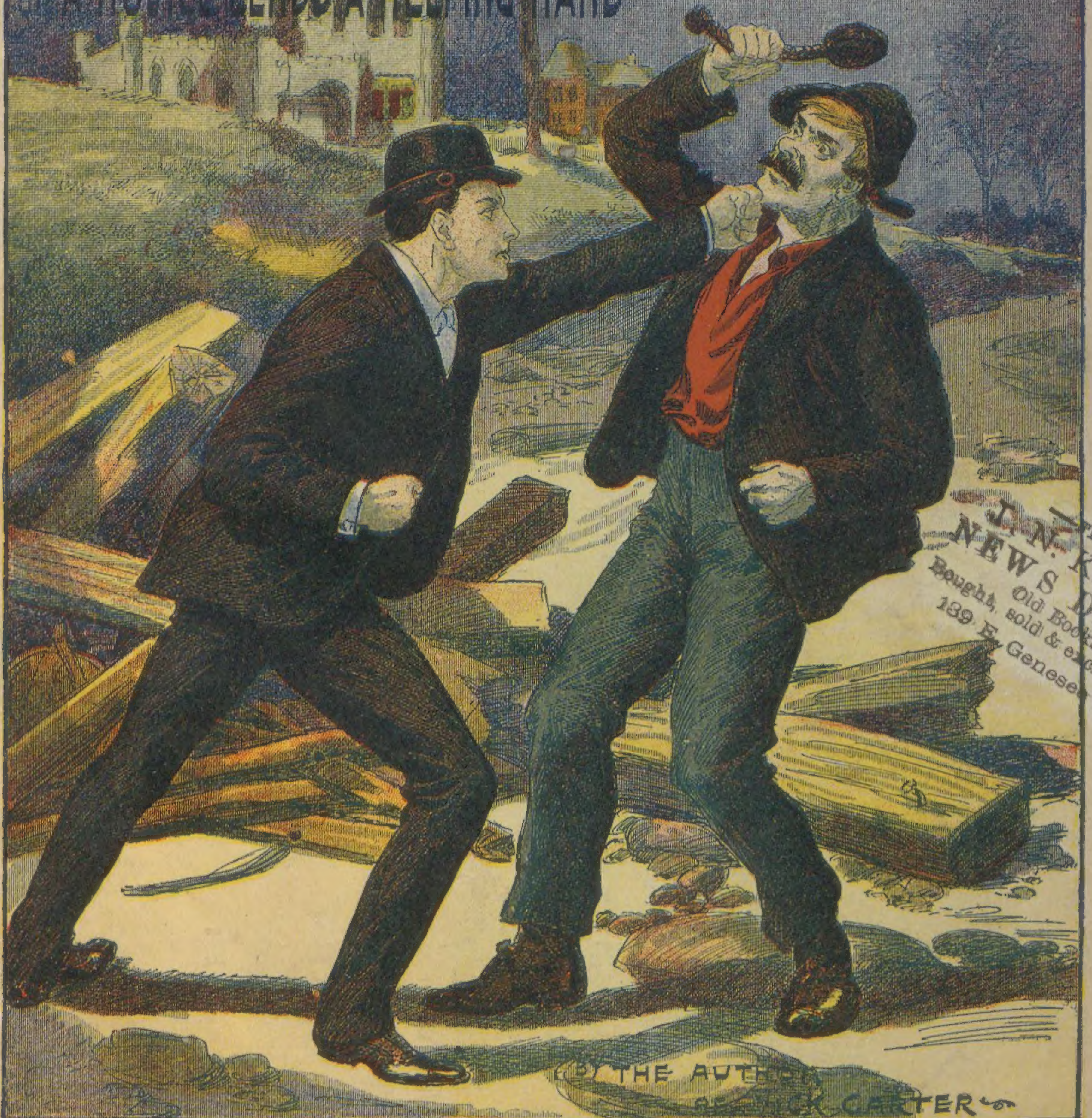
Issued weekly. Subscription price \$2.50 per year. Entered as second class matter at the N. Y. Post Office by STREET & SMOOT.

No. 223.

Price 5 Cents.

WORKING IN THE DARK

OR A NOVICE LENDS A HELPING HAND



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BY THE AUTHOR
NICK CARTER

BOB STRUCK THE AMAZED AND PARALYZED FOOTPAD ONLY ONCE.

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Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1901 by Street & Smith, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress,
Washington, D. C.

Entered as second class Matter at the New York, N. Y., Post Office.
Issued weekly.

Subscription price, \$2.50 per year.

April 6, 1901.

K. Mon. Aug. 19, 1918.

No. 223. STREET & SMITH, Publishers. NEW YORK.

238 William St., N. Y. 5 Cents.

WORKING IN THE DARK;

OR,

A Novice Lends a Helping Hand.

By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

THE START OF A GREAT CASE.

"Sparklers!"

"Did you see them?"

"Haven't I got eyes?"

"You have, and pretty keen ones, too, but they looked criss-cross this time. Sparklers! Under that old ragged cloak! The idea is ridiculous."

"The cloak's a fake. Look at that tailor-made suit under it, that dainty boot, trim glove! There's a genuine aristocrat for you, that girl, and she's got earrings on that are genuine as gold."

"I'll take your word for it. Come on; a lonely road, a dark spot, good cover to get to in case of an alarm—you do the watching, I'll get the flashers."

"Go slow, or you'll scare the game. See! she's hurrying her gait as if she sees us, mortally afraid already."

"Cut around here and head her off, then."

"That's the ticket!"

"Hello!"

Bob Ferret, Nick Carters' cleverest protege, uttered the last word impressively, with emphasis.

It was indeed a lonely road—so lonely that, noticing a solitary female figure coming down it a few minutes previous, Bob had stepped to a bench under some

drooping larches and waited for her to pass him, chivalrously appointing himself her guardian watcher till she got to a safe point—why, he could scarcely tell.

Bob had been taking a desultory ramble that had brought him to this lonely stretch of Chicago's famous lake shore drive just at dusk, and was thinking what a rare spot it was for a dark crime—had just recollected that in its vicinity the famous Cronin catch-basin murder had taken place, the Lincoln Park double tragedy, the Luetgert vat mystery, half a dozen notable crimes—when the appearance of the figure in question seemed to fill the picture with a tinge of the secret and sinister all of a sudden.

The figure was feminine and wore a long, faded cloak, the figure was girlish, every movement was graceful, buoyant, alert, yet a nervous, timid, furtive something marked every quick step.

"That girl is running away from something, or running to something," declared Bob, with the air of an expert. "Nick Carter would analyze her in a minute. I can't, except to know that she's on the tiptoe of excitement, agitation, dread. Which? There's nothing particular to fear just there, that I see. Ah! I change my mind. There is!"

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It was just here that Bob listened to the animated colloquy which begins this chapter.

The girl had gone some two hundred feet down the road, and Bob was about to saunter from cover and incidentally see that she got to where lights and houses became thicker again, when two other forms appeared on the scene.

At a glance shrewd Bob read them—at once, from the cut of their garb, their talk, their faces, their movements, he observed that they belonged to the genus sneak-thief, pickpocket, footpad.

They had undoubtedly been lurking in the brush lining the lake shore, afraid to show themselves, except under cover of darkness, or waiting for some victim to come along.

At all events they had seen the girl pass, and one of them had been sharp-witted enough to catch the sparkle of diamond rings in her ears, and trace beneath the old cloak evidences that she was not exactly what she seemed to be.

"They are after her earrings," murmured Bob. "I'll catch up with her, warn her, and be ready to give these fellows a warm reception when they make their pounce. Where are they? Oh! I understand! Skirting the sideways out of sight, running full tilt, I suppose, to head her off."

Bob started with a brisk step from his covert. The minute his foot struck the smooth asphalt pavement, in that still air, it gave out a keen echo.

The girl ahead turned quickly. Then like a frightened fawn she started forward at a much faster gait.

"Miss—oh, young lady," called Bob. "One moment, please."

If the hurrying girl could have seen Bob's open, honest, faith-inspiring face she would probably have halted promptly, but she only traced a pursuer in his hasty movements.

Bob guessed how he had alarmed her, and though she now broke into a run, he contented himself by walking as rapidly as he could, reserving his energies for a brisk forward dash when the footpads should suddenly spring from ambush.

The result was that the girl gained fully two hundred yards on him. This

Bob counted as too much of a lead, and was bent on lessening it when something decidedly startling diverted his attention with a shock.

Bang!

"Help!"

At the side of the portion of the road Bob was now traversing the unfinished outlines of the old lake shore beach still prevailed.

Long grass, straggling vines, scrub oak, brush and wreckage littered the spot.

There had come a flash, a sharp report and then a scream that was positively blood-curdling.

The alarm bell is the signal that puts the fireman's heart on instant alert—to the detective a pistol shot is a call to duty he can never disregard.

One sharp glance down the smooth roadway showed the girl, alarmed by the commotion back of her, speeding ahead more frantically than ever.

Bob followed the most pressing impulse of the instant—he sprang down amid the gloom and litter whence the flash, the report and the scream had emanated.

"Hey, there!" he called, advancing and peering. Then he stood and listened.

"Who fired? Is any one hurt?"

"Oh-h!"

A groan sent Bob running in one direction—suddenly to his mystification it led him directly contrary. He chased it to three points of the compass, then deciding that there was something queer about an injured person who could run around so nimbly, he came to a standstill.

"Where are you? Who are you?" he called out. "If it is some one attacked, hurt, come to me, call to me. I am a friend."

"Here! here!" voiced poignant tones.

"Where? Speak again, it is dark, the place is cluttered up. Where are you?"

"This way, lying behind the logs."

Bob made for the spot whence the call proceeded.

Sure enough, behind some rotting timbers he made out a squirming, human form.

"What's the matter——" he began.

"Shot, robbed! I've got a hole clear

through me. Lift me up—oh, the pain! the pain!"

Bob theorized quickly that the two footpads in pursuit of the girl had run across a new unfortunate in their detour, had made short work of him, and had set off on the track of the girl again.

He got down beside the log. The figure there was writhing in seeming agony, its face buried in its arms. Bob lifted the sufferer to an upright position.

"I will carry you to the road," he said.

"No, no. Not yet."

"Why not? I have a police whistle, I can soon summon help."

"Eh? Let me rest."

At that instant from way over toward the road a sharp shriek rang out.

"The girl—they have caught up with her. They have attacked her!" cried Bob.

So vividly did his imagination depict the terror and helplessness of the girl the footpads were after that Bob involuntarily made a start forward.

To his astonishment, the figure he had helped to the logs shot out a hand quickly, tremendously energetic for a wounded person.

"Why," began Bob. "The deuce!"

"You lay still!"

Bob Ferret glared for a second. Then he dodged, and then he fired up like a tiger.

He had played the good Samaritan to a decidedly ungrateful subject, for the fellow on the log had lifted a vigorous hand.

It contained a shot-weighted sandbag, and this was directed with expert force and precision directly at Bob's temple, with the hissing, venomous words described.

In a flash Bob discerned that he had been decoyed into a trap.

The fellow before him was one of the footpads. Bob understood the situation now. The two highwaymen had seen him after leaving the road.

While one ran on to intercept the girl, the other had posted himself here, waited for Bob, fired the shot, and uttered the cry for help so as to divert him from witnessing the attack on the girl or from helping her.

Now as he saw that Bob recognized him, he aimed that terrible slung-shot blow at him.

"You sneak!" blazed out Bob.

The sandbag grazed his head just stingingly enough to nettle.

Smack!

Bob was something more than an ordinary athlete. Once he had saved a famous pugilist from being fleeced of every dollar he possessed. The big maunder had offered a generous reward. Bob refused it. He simply asked the master of fist science to teach him a certain knockout blow.

That deft manœuvre stood Bob in great stead just now. He only struck the amazed and paralyzed footpad once.

The fellow, to use a familiar expression, "went kiting."

He shot backward and over as many as seven times. It was a daisy-clipper of a blow, for he mowed down grass, weeds, and bushes, and his head sank ears deep into a boggy spot with a groan.

Bob never waited to mark the result of his attack. Again from the road came that frightened feminine shriek.

He reached it quickly. One glance down its length gave wings of fleetness to his nimble feet.

The second footpad was in sight. His figure and that of the girl were clearly silhouetted against the lights of the next square.

Bob dashed forward, taking in as he did so the details of a spirited scene, and preparing to perform an active and helpful part in the same when the proper moment arrived.

The footpad was chasing the girl. She was not speeding ahead now, but criss-crossing, darting back, dodging forward, screaming, she sought to evade the outstretched clasp of the determined highwayman.

He had caught the girl by the cloak as Bob came up within twenty feet.

Holding to it with one hand, he made circling grabs with the other to violently wrench from their resting place the pendant earrings the girl wore.

The brutality demonstrated set fire to Bob's energies and indignation anew.

He was making for the brawny fellow, straight as an arrow, when the latter gave back.

The cloak had torn loose. Bob's eyes opened wide.

Like a beautiful butterfly emerging from its shell, there slipped from the garment the trim, graceful figure of a lovely young girl not more than twenty.

She had blonde hair that fell loose like tassels of gold in the force of her forward spring.

Bob saw a profile wonderfully clear and pure, observed in the proper attire of the dainty creature the mode, style and tone of culture and refinement.

The footpad fell back as the cloak gave way. Then he made a spring to catch and detain the girl.

His swooping clutch did not take in the earrings now. It seemed, and Bob noticed this for the first time, that she carried in one hand a long leather wallet or case.

The highwayman's feet became entangled in the dragging cloak and he went flat, but he bore with him this wallet which he had succeeded in tearing from the girl's hand.

A fearful cry broke from her lips. Upon the object wrested from her grasp the girl must have centred her whole soul, for now at losing it she turned as if ready to struggle for its recovery.

Just then she saw Bob. She took him for an accomplice of her first assailant, her affrighted face showed that, and she uttered a lost cry.

Just then, too, the highwayman discovered Bob. He instantly drew a revolver, and leveling it at the person he recognized as unfriendly fired point blank.

This was enough for the girl. Her overwrought senses drove her to frantic fright. Screaming wildly she flew down the road.

The first shot fired by the half-prostrate footpad missed Bob. The villain sprang the hammer of the weapon once again.

Bob was going fast and could not stop. He saw his peril. He ran right down on the man.

In close range he lifted his foot and kicked the weapon from the fingers of the footpad; in such close nick of time that it exploded as it gyrated through the air.

His continued forward spring was a pounce. He landed on the rising robber. Both bore back.

Bob wrested from his grasp the long wallet, tore from under him the cloak in which he was entangled, and got erect.

Almost instantly the other was on his feet also. Wringing helplessly the hand that had received the crippling blow from Bob's foot, he made a rush for the pistol, which lay some twenty feet down the road.

Bob anticipated him. He made a slide that sent up a shower of dust, gave the weapon a kick out of sight that would have won him distinction in the centre-field, and holding cloak and wallet firmly made a speedy dash and cast an eager glance down the road.

"Out of sight!" he ejaculated disappointedly.

He was through with the footpads for the present. He had outwitted them. That was enough, and he had eyes and thoughts only for the frantic young being who had been frightened into hysterical flight.

"Vanished!" he cried, coming to the intersecting street.

Yes, the girl was gone. Bob could look in all directions from the point he had reached.

He ran to a lane a few rods distant. Perhaps the young lady had sought shelter there. No. It was deserted. Bob returned to the drive. There was a cloud of dust way back near the bench where he had lingered.

Two scurrying forms were kicking it up. Bob guessed who they were.

"The footpads," he soliloquized. "They've had enough of it and are making off, fearing a patrol wagon will be the next feature of the programme."

Bob had got his breath, and his full composure back by this time.

"Quite a little episode," he soliloquized, gazing at the cloak and the wallet. "I had better hopes, from a sight of that stylish young lady and her agitation, than a mere clumsy attempt at robbery. Sort of scented a mystery, for there was the possible start of one in her actions. Pretty Quixotic, Bob Ferret, still—beauty in distress and

I did my duty only. Now, what am I going to do with these things?"

Bob handled over the cloak. It had been faded and patched before being trailed in the dust of the drive, and he voted it scarcely worth returning to its owner, even if he could find her.

The wallet he turned curiously over in his hand.

"Something hard in it," he observed. "Buttons, that's it. Here I've built up a whole Aladdin-dream of mysteries over a pretty girl slipping on an old cloak and going to match some buttons at a dry goods store. I'll turn the outfit over at the nearest police station."

Bob started to carry out the plan. Then, old and poverty stricken as the wallet looked, he took a notion to peer into it, and did so.

"Glory!" he shot out in the instant.

He was standing near an electric light, but it was not the force of its rays that caused him to draw back as if suddenly blinded.

Up from the wallet there flashed upon his dazzled vision, a flame that danced in bubbles and bars of such rare refulgent radiance as Bob Ferret had never met before.

He stared in wonder, almost in awe.

Reposing in the wallet, nested in an antique setting of gold that of itself represented no small value, was a necklace of diamonds, every one of them as large as a pea, every one of them of the first water, and worth, to casual computation, a big fortune.

CHAPTER II.

SILAS BURT, ATTORNEY.

"What have I struck?"

Bob Ferret was more than surprised—he was positively startled.

A Cinderella dream of opulence and magic mystery ran riot through his mind, as he looked down at the precious nest of gems in the old leather wallet.

If he knew anything about detective business—and Bob knew lots, for Nick Carter's schooling of his favorite graduate had been a thorough one—what promised to be the case of his life had resulted from a little evening stroll.

Bob had handled some pretty heavy affairs since he had come to Chicago a

few weeks previous on the trail of a noted counterfeiter—one Joseph Escher—whom he had run to cover and jailed after one of the most thrilling pursuits on record.

Yet never, to his way of thinking, had he stumbled across so promising a prospect as that afforded by the two strange objects left so strangely in his possession—a faded cloak, an old ragged wallet containing a small fortune in gems.

"Girls don't seek lonely, dangerous roads with a priceless necklace in their hands," reflected Bob. "Disguised, too. And she abandoned it! Why, the average woman would scratch your eyes out before she'd desert such sparkling prettiness. No, there's a mystery about the girl, that's sure; there's a bigger mystery about the diamonds, that's certain."

Bob folded the cloak under his arm, he tucked the diamonds away in a safe pocket.

Then with the eye, step and heart of a soldier seeking his commanding officer for orders, Bob proceeded straight to the Palmer House, where Nick Carter was stopping.

The veteran detective was examining by the aid of a microscope some bones which figured conspicuously in a great murder case that was attracting vital public attention.

He looked only once at his popular pupil, to discern that under a calm surface Bob was ready to bubble over with keen excitement.

"Something up, Bob?" he queried in his quiet but encouraging way.

"Look at these and see."

Bob told his story graphically as Nick examined the cloak and the wallet.

The detective pursed up his shrewd lips somewhat surprisedly as he came to inspect the flashing gems.

"Genuine," he remarked. "Bob, this is a great find."

"A great loss for some one, I should say."

"Hardly. You will hear from the owner."

"How?" demanded Bob, disbelievingly.

"Ah! I see you think not."

"Mr. Carter, I think not, decidedly."

"Why?"

"Because I am satisfied that between

being made to tell who she is and how she came in possession of these stones, the young lady I saw would let them go."

"Not hers, eh?"

"She never stole them."

"How do you know that?"

Bob looked flustered.

"Well," he said vaguely, "I guess it. She didn't look a thief. She didn't act it. I only caught a fleeting glimpse of her face, but it was a good one. She struck me, when I first noticed her, as a person under some great mental strain, and making for a point the reaching of which meant life or death to her."

Nick Carter handed the diamonds back to Bob. He resumed an overhauling of the cloak.

Bob watched him closely. He had seen the detective trace an identification from a button-hole raveling; build up a man, his size, his habits, his dress, his nationality, from a piece of sole leather, and he knew that in such expert hands that old cloak would be an interesting study.

"Whoever owned this cloak is intensely devotional," remarked the detective.

Bob, believing every statement Nick Carter ever made, absorbed this hone in silence.

"The front shows where it has been knelt on repeatedly, with regularity. They use candles, wax candles, for lights, where this comes from—see, the right side is badly spotted."

This did not exactly accord with the status of a wealthy and refined young lady, still Bob took it all in.

"If I was starting in to trace up the case from the cloak only," continued Nick, "I would get on the track of some one of the economical, devotional recluse institutions of the city."

"You don't mean a nunnery, a convent, Mr. Carter?"

"Scarcely, but something in that order."

"A boarding school?"

"Hardly that."

"Then——"

"Not worth figuring out just now, Bob. The diamonds are the glare that will attract clues, never fear. Wait—a little pocket. Why—there you are, Bob! Find your people."

Bob looked like a person who had found a gold mine. His big eyes expanded with something more than satisfaction as Nick's never-missing fingers detected the pocket in the cloak, its inclosure, a card, and scanning it handed it to him.

It was small, neat and new, although it was a business card, and it read simply:

SILAS BURT,

Attorney.

Michener Block.

"You know what to do?" questioned the detective.

"Like a bloodhound with its nose to the trail," observed Bob.

Nick Carter never said a word while Bob was busy at a wardrobe, making up a little outfit he always carried with him when on a shadow, nor when he secreted the diamonds in a close inside pocket.

They comprised a pretty big bulk of value for a boy to carry around Chicago streets after dark and possibly headed for all kinds of danger, but Bob, Nick Carter well knew, was alert, trustworthy, a quick worker, and might end the case in a single hour at the office of the lawyer, Silas Burt.

Bob started straight for Michener Block. He found it to be one of the old-fashioned, barn-like structures so common before the days of sky-scrapers.

He had no difficulty in locating the rooms occupied by the attorney named on the card found in the cloak, for the bulletin board in the down stairs hallway held only a few signs.

Bob got to the head of the stairs and took a leisurely inspection of rooms 9 and 10.

One led into the other. Both were lighted, the outer apartment from the reflection that came through a glass partition.

There was something about the looks of the office that impressed Bob, he could not tell why, with an idea that there occupant was not a very elaborate lawyer.

There was no library, everything wore an air of neglect. The rooms looked more like an exchange for pinchbeck watches than first-water necklaces.

"I don't show my hand until I know the man I've got to deal with," reflected Bob. "If that's him, he's harder than nails!"

Bob had noiselessly entered the outer office. By tiptoeing he could look through panes in the partition that were not clouded like the lower ones.

At a desk sat a thin, sharp-featured man, with a beak like a hawk, and a mouth cruelly cynical and unsympathetic.

Bob studied him narrowly. This was undoubtedly Silas Burt.

Bob braced himself up for an interview in which he should give no point away until he had pumped the other dry, and started to cross the room, when he halted, stared at the door, and stood undecided between many contrary-directing impulses.

He heard a voice, he saw the speaker, just arrived on the landing of the stairway, and quite plainly revealed by the light in the hallway below.

"He is in—Mr. Burt is in? I am not too late?" echoed in fluttering accents that bore unmistakable traces of breathlessness, anxiety and apprehension.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Burt is in, miss—just going home, though. Come in, miss, come in," spoke a smooth, oily voice, the owner of which was out of range of Bob's vision.

"The girl," murmured Bob, and his heart beat quicker—"the girl who lost the cloak and the diamonds. She must have come straight here."

Bob scarcely knew what to do. Secrecy was the essential of true detective action. If he only knew his ground a little better!

He glanced about for some hiding-place. Just one offered. A dubious one, and one that must be utilized promptly, but Bob was quick, and Bob was daring.

Beside a desk was a great high paper basket. It seemed pretty well filled, but as Bob thrust his hand down into it he found that the slightly crumpled contents with two newspapers thrown carelessly on top, really left a great deal of empty space.

Bob was nestled in place, the papers pulled back over his head, just as the two speakers he had heard appeared at the threshold of the outer office.

CHAPTER III.

THE PRICE OF A SECRET.

The basket was a slatted pine weave. Bob was faced so he could take in partit-

ion and door. He took in the latter now.

"It's no mistake—it's the girl of the lake shore drive," he redetermined.

Her face was very pale, her lips twitching piteously. Somewhere she had secured a new shoulder covering, a cheap material mantle picked up probably in some little dry goods store, and this her fingers plucked at nervously as she followed her companion.

The latter Bob regarded rather curiously, for he was a dwarfed specimen of humanity whose mind seemed little as his form.

He exactly reminded Bob of a pilot wasp directing a fly into the web of a waiting spider.

As the dwarf knocked at the door of the partition, Bob heard him tell his companion that he was Mr. Burt's confidential clerk.

"Who's there?" proceeded from the private office.

"It's me, Mr. Burt."

"Wickham, you rascal! Hanging around to sneak and spy out what you can of my business, eh?" snarled the attorney. "Oh! ah! excuse me—upon my soul! Miss Ethel Morse."

"Yes, sir."

The attorney became all smiles. He waved the lady into the next room, he waved her to a chair.

She sank into it on the verge of fainting, Bob thought.

"Be off with you!" shouted Burt to his elfish clerk. "Don't let me see your ugly carcass around here again to-night. Your duties end at six."

"I thought you might need me for some special service, Mr. Burt," whined the dwarf. "I am so faithful, sir!"

"Bah! Begone I tell you!"

Burt closed the partition door with a slam. The minute he did so, all the subservient cringing of the dwarf changed.

He ground his teeth, he hissed and spat, he drew his finger across his throat with an undertoned "ski-ll!" as if he would revel in drawing a keen-bladed knife just that way across the throat of Mr. Silas Burt.

Then he shook his fist at his invisible enemy a little too far, it seemed, for his hand came up against the partition with a sounding thwack.

Out came Burt, furious. The dwarf made a run for the hall. The lawyer hurled some menacing words after him, locked the hall door, and returned to his private office, leaving the communicating door wide open.

"Ah! this is better," murmured Bob, entirely satisfied.

He could now both see and hear without difficulty.

The girl the lawyer had called Miss Ethel Morse sat facing him, trembling all over, one hand held tightly across her breast as if to check the throbbings that were consuming her.

"You are Mr. Burt?" she said. "Listen, sir—I do not wish to take up your time—every moment I am in the public streets is fraught with danger to me."

"Indeed?" purred the lawyer, tranquilly.

"You—you have those—those documents?"

Burt arose. He swung open the door of a great vault and pointed into it.

He had probably prepared for just the dramatic move he made, expecting the visit, for wheeled up right to the door was a small but heavy steel safe.

"In there, miss, in there," he announced. "Oh, yes, I have them close, very close—deuced close!"

"I—I must have those papers," faltered the girl.

"Certainly, certainly," answered the attorney, with great assumed briskness of manner, as if he was anxious to tear open the strong metal receptacle and force the contents upon her. "But—have you brought the amount required?"

The girl started forward as if to make a pitiful plea to the lawyer. Then his hard, covetous face repelled her, and she burst into hysterical tears.

"Come! come!" snarled Burt, becoming suddenly ferocious, "this is a business office, not a tear tank. Have you the amount, that's the question?"

"No," sobbed the poor girl.

"Not? That settles it."

"I beg of you—listen to me."

"Hold! It's equivalent? You wrote you might furnish security, good, solid, portable property, mind you!"

"I—I had it."

"What does 'had it' mean?" demanded the lawyer.

"I started for here to-night with that which you would accept—a necklace of diamonds worth——"

"Yes, yes—the famous Morse necklace," cried the lawyer, with gloating eyes afire. "I would take that—yes, indeed, I would accept that as collateral."

"But I lost it!" moaned the girl.

"How! What! Absurd!"

"I did—oh, I pray you, sir, believe me! Indeed, I lost it. I secured it, I hastened to deliver it to you. I was attacked by highwaymen, I was robbed."

Burt regarded his beautiful client as if he would read her through and through.

"I don't believe you'd dare to lie to me," he muttered. "Very well, if you can afford it, I can. Now, then, miss, sharp's the word! I agreed to hold the documents in that iron box for you till eight o'clock this evening."

"You did, sir."

"I extend the time. Till midnight. I extend the time. You understand—twenty thousand dollars or its equivalent by twelve, midnight, otherwise——"

The girl shrank as if the lawyer had struck her, at the glance of his eyes as he pronounced that ominous word.

"I will try," she voiced feebly.

"Try what?" snapped Burt.

"To get the—the equivalent."

"Good. You know where it is. You know how to reach it. There is the tiara of pearls, the two ruby bracelets and the big solitaire left yet. Mind you, I advise nothing. I only say I accept collateral. On or before midnight. If you bring it I open the safe. If you do not bring it——"

Burt dramatically raised a letter weight. Dramatically he let go of it.

"Something drops!" he announced.

"Good-night. Busy man. You know the terms. Act or suffer. As you choose."

The girl wavered as she got to her feet. Once she seemed on the point of falling on her knees before the hard-hearted scoundrel who was blackmailing her, but he waved her with mock politeness into the next room and unlocked and threw open the door.

"You—you will surely wait till mid-

night?" fluttered the girl ere she crossed the last threshold.

"My word," answered Mr. Silas Burt, swelling out with conscious rectitude "is my bond!"

Bob heard the young lady cross the hall with an unsteady step. Burt stepped inside the office. Then he whistled twice, low and quick.

The dwarf must have been hovering very near at hand, for he appeared from some dark corner as if by magic.

"You need me after all, master?" he grinned up into Burt's face.

"Yes, you imp! You see that girl?"

Wickham nodded.

"Follow her. Bring me back word where she is hiding herself."

The attorney backed into the office, chuckling craftily, as though he had just forged another link in some strong chain of self interest and aggrandizement.

Bob was getting ready to leap out of the waste paper basket and pursue the girl and the dwarf as soon as Burt re-entered his private office.

This, however, the lawyer did not do. Instead, he stood in the centre of the outer office reflecting deeply.

"She'll do it," the suspenseful Bob heard him mutter. "Of course she'll do it. No other way. I've got her tight. When I find where she is, I'll have her tighter. A good piece of work. I have a mind to treat myself. Let me see, what shall it be? Why, here's the cigar that imp Wickham presented me with to-day. Good enough. A truly economical celebration—ha! ha!"

The lawyer took a black, ragged cigar from his pocket that Bob decided was a "two-fer."

He lit a match, and backing to the desk planted himself not four feet from Bob, prepared to take a leisurely smoke.

"Oh, drat it!" muttered the discomposed lurker.

He was baffled in any hope of getting on the trail of Miss Ethel Morse, and it made him wriggle.

A discovery a second later, however, added a new spice of stimulation to the general ensemble, lively as it already was.

Burt had thrown the match he had used to light the cigar into the waste basket.

Bob heard it drop through the crumpled papers.

Then he felt a crisping glow cross his head, saw a growing, vapory luminosity, and knew that the contents of the paper waste basket had caught on fire.

CHAPTER IV.

SEALED LIPS.

Bob was in no particularly close place, for a spring or a tip would instantly relieve him from all discomfort or danger.

He was not ready, however, to face the lawyer just yet, and regretful as he was that he had lost the chance to follow the girl, Ethel, he was more regretful that he would have to make a break for liberty during which Burt would be bound to catch a glimpse of him.

"And he won't forget me when I bob up again," declared the unfortunate occupant of the waste basket, getting ready to vacate it.

"Hi! hey! hello! what's this? Fire!"

Just as Bob got ready to pop up, the top papers burst into vivid flame and Burt discovered the conflagration.

He gave the basket a kick that sent it over sideways. Bob rolled out in full view but the lawyer did not see him.

Flash went something, as if a fire-cracker had been dropped directly in front of the lawyer's face.

"Ugh! ouch! whoo!" yelled Burt.

Bob, scrambling to his feet, saw what had occurred, and thanked his lucky stars that an unforeseen accident covered his flight as by a curtain.

A long, thin drapery hung over the desk to cover it when not in use, and this the lawyer had disarranged. It came right over his face, trailed in the basket, burst into a tearing blaze, and for a second Burt wore a mantle of fire.

While he was digging at his eyes and gyrating industriously, Bob slid to the hall and down the stairs with a chuckle of supreme satisfaction.

"They've vanished, both of them," muttered Bob, disappointedly, a moment later, looking up and down the street.

Then he decided not to give it up so easily. The girl, Ethel, and the dwarf Wickham, could not have gone for.

Bob shrewdly guessed that the girl

would take an unfrequented course, if she could choose.

At a venture he went down the street on which the building sided, for it was dark and somewhat unfrequented.

The haphazard guess proved a good one. Bob had not gone a square before he saw the dwarf a little ahead of him.

Peering beyond, he made out a girlish figure flitting along like a shadow.

Twice she crossed the street, and Bob finally thought out her idea in doing this.

Each time it was just before a street car came along, and each time she looked quickly back of her.

"She wants to take a car," reflected Bob, "and she sees the dwarf shadowing her. I'll soon fix that."

Bob saw the approaching lights of a third street car. The girl began to flutter in her walk and betray unmistakable signs of nervousness.

The dwarf, slinking along without a thought beside his quest, was a light weight for Bob to handle.

As they were passing a double-barreled ash box, Bob fixed his eyes on the side that had a hasp and catch attached.

He did a pretty bold thing, but he did it easily.

As the dwarf neared the box Bob glided directly behind him.

With one hand he lifted the cover. With the other he fairly swept Wickham off his feet.

The dwarf went all doubled up, howling, into a nest just fit for such carrion, down went the cover, ahead shot Bob, and the next minute he had the satisfaction of seeing the girl glance back, apparently note the absence of her trailer, approach a car with a signal and board it.

"The rest is easy," muttered Bob as a minute later he carelessly swung onto its front platform himself, and the knocking and shouting from the box where he had imprisoned the dwarf faded away in the distance.

Bob peered cautiously into the car. The girl had put on a thick veil and sat crouched up in a corner, her head bent on her breast, her hands linked in her lap.

It was the first moment for over an hour that Bob could find leisure to think, and he tried hard to arrange this new

mysterious case in the shape of a coherent problem.

One fact was simple: The girl was endeavoring to bribe the lawyer, Burt, to deliver over to her certain documents that he held in the stout steel safe.

What those documents were and what the girl's interest in them, Bob did not know, could not even guess, but he determined to know before the night was over.

"That's what I'm following her for," soliloquized Bob. "Poor thing! It makes my blood boil to think of that big brute of a lawyer talking to her as if she was the dirt under his feet."

Bob got heroic as he realized the balance of power he held, with the diamond necklace in his possession.

"She'll listen to reason soon as I get a chance to show that I'm straight and her friend," decided Bob. "Wish I had Nick Carter at my right hand just at this juncture of the case. He'd soon get the rights of things. Now then my lady, you and I don't part company till I see where you go to."

The girl got off the car after riding about a mile. Bob got off, too. She went with a faster and firmer step now.

The walks were tree-lined, there were few lamps, and Bob kept pretty close to her. They passed a building with a high brick wall around it.

It sided on an alley. The girl turned into this. Bob got to the lane just in time to see her take a ladder from the side of the wall, tip it to the top, hurry over it, draw it after her and descend on the other side.

"Well!" he ejaculated.

Bob stood studying the situation for a few moments.

"Here's a queer go," he reflected. "What is the place, anyway?"

Bob went hastily around to the front. A gloomy four-story building came out plumb with the street.

Its entrance was sunk in. He went up a step or two to read a polished brass door-plate: "Deaconesses' Home."

"That's plain," he commented. "What a wise fellow Nick Carter is—called the turn first round on that cloak! This is a place where women retire from the world and lead a life of devotion and

unselfishness, going out to nurse and all that. That girl's tony dress and diamond juggling as if she had a wagon load of them don't exactly hinge with things, but—she's all right, that I do know. A monster is crushing her, and—I shan't let him!"

Bob came back to the alley. He noticed that the girl had left the ladder in place on the other side of the wall.

"She's coming out again soon, or she wouldn't leave that there to show she'd been stealing away," he theorized. "Well, I can guess some of the rest of it out. She's got a lot more diamonds. She's come after them to take them back to that scoundrel of a lawyer. She shan't. I think I can convince her that it's best not to. Up we go! Might just as well have it out with her in the garden there where she can't run, as any place else."

Bob took from his pocket one of his invaluable aids in detective manœuvring—a silk-covered wire with a muffled hook on its end.

He soon had a hold on the inside coping of the wall, was up the outside, astride the top, and half way down the ladder, when he came to a halt with a shock.

As if she had come up from the ground, confronting him not two feet away, was the girl, Miss Ethel Morse.

"You cannot come in here!" she spoke. "Who are you? Go back!"

Bob lifted his cap in the politest way possible.

"Miss Ethel Morse," he said, softly, "I must come in here. I can't go back till I have had a little talk with you. I'm the person who saved you from being robbed on the lake shore drive, and I've come to give you back your diamonds."

Bob grouped all his surprises in a bunch. He wound up by extending the old wallet.

The girl never spoke a word. Over the top of the wall came the glint of a light directly on her face. It was white as marble.

"Don't speak till you get over being flustered," went on Bob, gently. "I am your friend, young lady. Getting back your diamonds proves it, don't it?"

Now, listen to me. What is that package in your hand?"

The girl started. She held in one hand a small chamois bag. It was crusted with soil, as if it had just been exhumed from some hiding place in the garden. She essayed to slip the bag out of sight.

"You are taking that to that scoundrel of a lawyer, Silas Burt," proceeded Bob. "You see I know all about it, young lady, listen to me. I am only a boy, but I've got a man behind me, Nick Carter, the great detective."

If Bob had sought to reassure the girl, he had proceeded in the wrong way.

She drew back in vivid terror.

"Oh! everything is known, then. The law will reach us! Now I must get the documents if it costs me my life! Give me my property—give me my property—give it me, I tell you!" cried the excited girl, wildly, a glint of true spirit coming to her eyes. "You only guess what my secret covers—I know, alas! I know only too well."

Bob drew back his hand. It seemed as if his agitated companion would fairly snatch the gems from him.

"Miss Ethel Morse," he said firmly, "you're scared. No, no—listen to me! There's an easier way than giving up a fortune to shut the lips of a harpy. You shall have the diamonds, for they are yours, but not until you give me a chance to negotiate with this Mr. Silas Burt. Listen——"

Crack—crash!

Bob precipitated a sudden catastrophe. He sought to get down to the ground. At the same moment the girl made a desperate endeavor to reach the wallet.

The double weight bore upon a particularly weak and rotten part of the ladder.

What happened Bob could only guess afterward. Either a round snapped with force sufficient to pound his head as if it was a sledge-hammer, or breaking, it let him through and his head struck the brick wall behind.

At all events, Bob was snuffed out quicker than he had ever been before.

When he opened his eyes he was lying on the dewy grass. A delicate lace handkerchief wetted was across his brow.

"I say!" he did say, sat up, shut his

eyes to let his head get through whirling, and then took a startled look around him.

"Oh, bother!" he commented in dire dismay.

A woman had got her wilful way—the broken end of a ladder propped as high as it would go on the other side of the wall, the fact that the wallet containing the diamond necklace was gone, told Bob this.

He took out his watch and glanced at it.

"Been here over an hour," he calculated. "Too bad! She's good and she means kindly, or she wouldn't have put the bandage on my head, but she thinks she knows her own business best, and has acted accordingly."

Bob's face wore a rueful expression. He felt that he had been knocked out at a vital stage of the game.

"No use thinking of getting to Burt's," he ruminated. "The girl has reached there long since and I'm not in the best shape to try. No, I'll wait. But there shall be a reckoning. That girl must let light in on the mystery of this affair, or Burt shall."

Bob waited patiently for half an hour. Then he watched the top of the wall anxiously.

There came a scraping sound at last. It was accompanied by the echo of a low voice that issued jerky sobs.

He made out Miss Ethel Morse's swaying figure aloft. She seemed to scarcely have the strength to pull the ladder up, but she finally got it tilted.

Bob sprang forward as she almost fell its length, and caught her in his arms and steadied her.

She did not shrink from him. Somehow he curdled as her eyes fell full upon him. They were haunted with a dull, glassy look more boding by far than the brilliant, burning excitement of the earlier evening.

"Miss Morse!" he spoke, "Miss Morse! do you not know—do you not remember me?"

"Next week, he said!" murmured the girl in a dreamy, far-away tone. "He took the gems and said 'next week!' But no one can get the papers, for no one knows the combination of the safe! I am so tired. 'Next week,' he said, 'next week!'"

"Gracious! She's gone!"

Like a fairy lily stricken down by the reaper's sickle the poor girl sank to the ground.

Bob's face was a study. He felt desperately chagrined, anxious, disappointed.

There was no doubt but what the girl had delivered the diamonds, not only those in the wallet, but those in the chamois bag, into the possession of the crafty lawyer.

He had put her off with promises concerning the papers, and she had come home a shattered wreck, her mind gone wandering amid the reaction of an intense strain of excitement.

Bob looked helplessly at his beautiful charge. Her lips were sealed. His own set grimly.

"I'll make some one pay for this, just on general principles of humanity," he promised himself stanchly. "Oh! the vampires of this world—a dove in the grip of an eagle! What am I going to do with her?"

Bob left the prostrate girl for a moment and made a cautious reconnoitre of the building at the front of the garden.

He found a side door near a locked gate. It had a bell.

To its threshold he carried the girl, gave the bell knob half-a-dozen quick, vigorous pulls, and retreated into the safe shelter of some shrubbery.

The door opened and a flood of light poured out.

Two affrighted women regarded the prostrate form.

"For mercy's sake! What is this?" cried one with a little scream of alarm.

"Why, it's the girl who asked a refuge here last week."

"But how comes she here?"

"Perhaps she fell asleep in the garden, and we locked her out. Why! she is burning up with fever. Quick! Get her to her room and call the doctor."

"Even they don't know who she is," murmured Bob, as the door closed and patient and nurses disappeared.

Bob lingered about the spot. Then a light upstairs caught his eye.

A window was opened. A man and the two women Bob had seen fluttered before it at intervals.

'Then one of them came to the window and the man joined her.

Bob pricked up his ears eagerly as he heard her query:

"She is ill, doctor?"

Bob's heart went down to his boots as he heard the doctor's reply:

"A bad case of brain fever. She must have been unduly excited. She will not know you again for days—if ever."

"That settles this end of the case," muttered Bob Ferret, retreating with a set, grim face to the ladder and the wall. "It's a fight between you and I now, Mr. Silas Burt, attorney, Michener block—a fight to the death!"

CHAPTER V.

THE STEEL SAFE.

Midnight!

Bob Ferret counted the strokes of a distant bell. The great city had quieted down. Chicago was asleep, but he had never felt more wide awake in his life.

Standing at a street corner two squares distant from the office of Silas Burt, attorney, Nick Carter's youngest detective felt a decidedly old head on his shoulders, if care and perplexity went for anything.

"It's baffling," soliloquized Bob, and thereby he precisely expressed the condition of the great diamond mystery.

Two hours later he had turned from the recluse home of the unfortunate Miss Ethel Morse, with the settled conviction that it would be many a day before her lips would be unsealed to speak a single coherent word regarding her identity or the princely gems she had delivered up as the price of a dread secret.

It was getting at that secret that bothered Bob. He had not one clear inkling of what lay under the surface of the mystifying affair, except that Silas Burt was blackmailing a frightened, defenseless, fugitive girl.

In a sort of desperation of suspense and resolve Bob had proceeded at once to the lawyer's office, to find it closed and dark.

Then he learned where Burt lived in bachelor quarters near by.

Bob repaired thither, to hear from the janitor of the building that the attorney had gone to some all-night celebration of a club he belonged to, the name of which he could not remember.

This seemed to settle affairs till morning, but Bob's impetuous nature forbade him waiting till morning.

He started forthwith to trace up the dwarf, Wickham, Burt's confidential clerk.

The ill-favored creature boarded a mile distant, but Bob cheerfully tramped it.

Here another disappointment greeted him. The landlady of the dwarf, roused up, crossly guaranteed the information that Wickham had left early in the evening stating he would not return till the following night.

Bob was so worried and thoughtful as he left the place that he proceeded along lost in absorbed reflection, but an unconscious power of attraction brought him straight back to the vicinity of the lawyer's office before he was aware of it.

"I simply can't go home—I'd toss all night," muttered Bob, testily. "Oh! I'm cut out for a detective all right, if fretting to keep at work is a merit. Say! I'd do it in a minute if I knew how!"

Bob's rather glum face began to work with animation as these words broke from his lips.

A daring idea had struck him. At first it seemed to fairly scare him. He turned his face resolutely in a direction contrary to the lawyer's office. Then sturdily, a reckless dash of spirit in his eyes, he reversed his position.

"I'll take a look, anyway," declared Bob. "That can do no harm. Would I do it? If I had such an acquaintance as Cracksman Bob of New York here in Chicago, I'd soon make that vault door open and take a whack at the little steel safe!"

Bob's morals were eminently all right. He was a law guardian, not a law breaker, but he felt that he would be justified in every sense of the word in learning what the lawyer's secret strong box contained, no matter how he did it.

The little steel safe probably held not only the compromising documents, for which Miss Ethel Morse had sacrificed so much, but the diamonds she had delivered up that night. It was not likely that Burt would carry such valuables about with him when calculating to be away from home till morning.

Bob got to the bottom of the stairs

leading to the lawyer's offices, feeling as if a steel wire was pulling him irresistibly along.

"I'll take a close survey of the office," he muttered. "No harm in that. If I can get in, why, I might inspect the vault door to see how complicated it is. Then I'll hurry to Mr. Carter. Nick can open any safe by the sense of touch. I don't want to make a burglar of the straightest man I ever knew. but he might help me out, if he saw how vital it is that we act before papers and diamonds become absorbed by that cormorant, Burt."

Bob went up the stairs. The building was dark, silent, apparently without a tenant.

He crossed the hall to the entrance to Burt's offices. Looking up to estimate the chances of getting in through the transom, his fingers casually turning the knob, he uttered a sharp

"Hello!"

The next moment the ejaculation of surprise was heightened by one of clear wonderment:

"Queer!"

It was queer—very! The outside door was unlocked.

Entering the first room, Bob found the partition door swung.

Passing its threshold, he almost staggered, for the street light that came in through the windows showed not only the door of the big iron vault open, but, standing conveniently rolled up to it, the little steel safe.

Bob Ferret did not believe in spirits, but a thrilling conviction passed through his mind that some good fairies of fortune must have a hand in this wonderful, this bewildering piece of luck.

There was the steel safe—the receptacle of diamonds, and documents—in reach, in grasp.

His fingers tingled as he walked toward it, as if attracted by a powerful magnet.

"Magic or miracle, the way is open for me!" he murmured. "Say, is it a trap?"

Bob was a thinker. His experience had made him suspicious. Here was too glaring a situation to be due purely to natural results.

"No," he ejaculated convincingly the next instant. "I see how it is. Some one has been in here and has left for just a

moment, and I've happened in just at that moment. Who is it?"

Bob's hand on the steel safe, he struck a vivid, listening attitude.

And then Bob did the only thing to do under the circumstances, although he was sorry for it afterward—bolted over the stone threshold of the vault, squeezed past the safe, and tried to believe that he was secure from discovery in a dark corner, until he could learn what was going on to keep the lawyer's office and vault open to the inspection of any casual passer by after midnight.

"It's the dwarf," muttered Bob, a second later, as a remembered voice came nearer.

"It's Wickham and some one with him," continued Bob, peering past the open door of the vault—"a big, burly fellow. Looks like a drayman. Funny! What's up, I wonder?"

Bob crowded behind a shelf slanting across the end of the vault, and did most of his peering past its edge.

"Is that it?" demanded a strong, hoarse voice.

"That's it."

"Hum! Say, have you got a derrick!"

"Have I got what?" snapped the dwarf's snarling voice.

"A derrick. Why, that must weigh a ton."

"It don't, nor anything like it. It weighs just four hundred and fifty pounds. See here."

Bob was a little surprised at the strength exhibited by the dwarf. He had seized one handle of the safe and tilted it half a foot.

"Get her overcoated," he ordered briskly. "Come, we've no time to waste."

Bob's eyes began to open wider and wider. The dwarf had produced a thick, burlap bag.

This the two men drew over the safe, tied its ends neatly about the castored feet, and then pulled it out into the office.

"Now, then," spoke the dwarf, "we'll roll it gently down the hall—have to lift it down the stairs to the alley and the dray."

"Some one will tumble, with that heavy burden," growled the drayman.

"It won't be me. Come, for a man who will wake up with a thousand dollars in his pocket to-morrow morning, you don't seem particularly cheerful."

"Say, suppose they trace this up?"

"I expect they will."

"You do!"

"Certainly. To me, but by daylight I and it will be where Silas Burt won't find either in a hurry. I wonder what he'll think of his 'ulgy carcass,' 'carrion crow,' 'hunchbacked monstrosity,' when he finds me gone. Come ahead. No, wait."

Slam!

"Hold on!"

Bob saw the vault door come shut, and Bob did what ninety-nine persons out of a hundred would do under the same circumstances—started for the door.

He had no intention of being shut into a close vault, and suffocated.

He threw himself against the slamming mass of iron with all his might, and just in time, for the sliding tumblers clicked, and the lock bars grazed the jamb as the dwarf gave back.

Out with a rush came Bob, squarely against the drayman.

"What's this?" he voiced, astounded.

"Grab him!" shouted the dwarf. "The dickens! Say! You're the fellow who shut me into an ash box to-night!"

The speaker's little bead-like eyes burned viciously down into Bob's face.

"Suppose I am?" demanded the latter, boldly.

"You—you're a spy!"

"Oh, no!"

"Worse—a spotter for some detective. Don't let him go. Aha!"

Bob thrashed about in a frantic effort to get loose, but the drayman's grasp was like hickory—ducked, dodged, to evade a handkerchief pressed quickly to his nose by the dwarf.

"Chloroformed! I go prepared. See?" chuckled the fellow. Let him slide down. That's it. Now, help me tie him."

"See here, I ain't hired——"

"I said help me tie him! Do you want to risk that thousand dollars by delay?"

Bob was not unconscious, but he was helpless. He had got a good dose of the anæsthetic. By the time its influence began to dissipate he was tied hand and

foot, and, bearing a coil of rope looped across one arm, the dwarf picked up his feet.

"Come on," he directed.

"Say, I don't like——"

"I do. Better mind me. Think I'll leave him here, to holler and bring a crowd, and get on my track before morning?"

"What are you going to do with him?"

"I'd put him in the vault but he'd smother. I've a plan. Lug him along. I'll show you."

Bob was borne down a dark hall, and then up a winding rear stairway. A narrow lumber room with a narrow window came next.

"Drop him," ordered the dwarf, and Bob felt him tying a rope under his arms. "Now, then, lift him and slide him through the window."

"Say, this will be murder!" demurred the drayman.

"Not a bit of it."

"It's forty feet down!"

"All the safer. I shan't hurt him. Slide him over the sill, steady his shoulders. Let him graze the edge of the bricks head up, going down. Pay out the rope."

Bob was helpless. He was rudely scraped and jammed against a rough wall. Then came a jerking halt.

His heart came into his mouth, for he guessed that the rope had not been found long enough.

"Let go!" sounded the dwarf's snarling tones aloft.

Slam! Bob landed.

CHAPTER VI.

BLOCKED!

Bob's head cracked as he landed, and his wits were pretty well mixed for a minute or two.

"Boxed in!" he murmured, with a rueful stare at his environment.

"Wheels within wheels!" he pronounced, a minute later, thinking of the new developments of the hour.

The dwarf was paying back Lawyer Burt's long years of abuse and robbing him of the little steel safe and all it contained.

He had lured a drayman to help him lug that receptacle away bodily, was pay-

ing one thousand dollars to get it and himself out of the attorney's reach, which, Bob guessed, estimating the dwarf's subtle cleverness, practically meant a complete vanishment.

"It's a bad complication," complained Bob. "I've got the tarred end of the stick this time, sure!"

Bob set to work with a will to liberate himself.

This was not a very difficult task. He bit the rope securing his hands in two, untied those encircling his feet, stood up, and shook himself generally together.

Bob rather marveled at the dwarf leaving him so unsecurely tied until he began inspecting the place he was in.

Then he discerned that he was about as helpless with the full use of his hands and feet, as if still bound.

There was not a break for nearly fifty feet up—here the window showed through which he had been lowered.

A little above that the roof slanted.

A telegraph wire crossed here.

On four sides were blank walls—the wall, too, of unoccupied buildings.

Bob had not much heart to work. He had been in much more distressing dilemmas, and with daylight he would find some way of calling the attention of outsiders to his plight.

What bothered him was the turn affairs had taken. Miss Ethel Morse might die, certainly Lawyer Burt would never disclose the secret of the diamonds. The dwarf had fled with the safe and contents.

He had probably been waiting for a rich haul for years, and that meant plans ripe and perfect. Bob decided that he would not be easily traced.

Still, there were clues in sight to run down—frail ones, hazy ones—but that very fact stimulated Bob's investigating spirit all the more keenly.

If he could get out of the court within the next hour or two, there was the drayman to follow up—the course his vehicle had taken to trace out.

To the uninitiated this would seem a herculean task—to Bob it was a clear trail after a vehicle conspicuous from its solitary appearance on the public streets after midnight.

Bob raged about the court like a caged lion or bear for ten minutes.

Then he fixed his eye on the telegraph wire aloft, and then he began searching over the surface of the court floor.

He found a broken piece of flagging at last. It weighed perhaps three pounds.

He tied this to the end of the rope that had dropped with him, and lengthened this out with the pieces that had secured his limbs.

Bob got into expert range of the wire, and began whirling the weighted end of the rope.

Up it went and missed.

"Expected that," he muttered, "but I shall get there before I'm through."

Bob did just that after fully a dozen throws.

Like a slung shot hurled at a kite string, the missile finally struck the wire, whirled round and round it about three feet of the slack rope, and Bob reached for the lower dangling end.

On two former occasions Bob had utilized wires to help him out of trouble.

Once he had slid clear across the street on a slanting wire, pursued by a man from whom he had recovered some stolen bonds.

On another occasion he had hung from a copper strand, trying to peer into a window beyond which some safe blowers were at work.

"I've got a good hold-up there," he soliloquized. "It's just a question of how stout the roof fastenings are. It seems to hold. Up we go. No, we don't. Bother!"

Bob got up five feet slowly, and came down five feet quick.

The wire had given way.

"Broke at the insulator," he commented, as the severed end came jangling down the side of the building about ten feet.

He tried to maintain a purchase on this, but the rope slipped free.

Bob sat down now. He had done his level best and his present resources were exhausted.

He consulted his watch. It was just one o'clock—five hours to daylight.

"I've worked myself out and I've thought myself out," he observed. "I guess Nick Carter's clear head will have to show me how to begin all over fresh in the morning."

Bob snuggled against the wall and

closed his eyes. It was easy to be philosophical when helpless. In ten minutes he was asleep.

He awoke with the sound of loud hailing voices ringing in his ears, and was a little mystified at first, for he observed that it was still dark.

"Found the break?" rung out overhead.

"Here she is. Splice a wire. The frame's all loosened this side. There she goes—over!"

Bob got up promptly, ready to dodge missiles.

One had come down with a crash—a piece of wood into which was grooved a standard.

The next instant a rope ladder came slowly unwinding, trailing a dozen yards on the ground and down it sped a nimble human figure.

"Hello!" shot out Bob.

A man landing as neatly on the court flags as if he did such things for a living, turned sharply at Bob's hail.

"Well!" he observed, staring hard—"how did you come here?"

"I did not come, I was dropped here."

"Eh?"

"For a fact. Say," asked Bob, getting enlightened, "you are line repairers?"

"We're not out at five o'clock in the morning looking for a lost current for fun, exactly—yes, city fire alarm."

"Will you give me a chance to get aloft?"

"If you want to risk breaking your neck."

"Oh, I guess not."

The man came back to the roof with the dropped line accessory with something of an admiring stare for Bob.

"You'd do for an apprentice in our line," he remarked.

Bob evaded any elaborate explanations. He did not even tell that he was responsible for the broken wire.

He got to the street from the roof, and made a prompt visit to the lawyer's office.

The doors were locked. Clinging to the knob, Bob peered over the transom.

He could look across the outer office, and through the glass partition of the inner one.

The little steel safe was gone.

"I expected that," he soliloquized. "Now, what next?"

According to all precedent, in doubt, disappointment or distress, Nick Carter's kindly advice was due.

"I hate to report such a terribly dismal failure," muttered Bob. "It's a weak confession of failure. See here! What's the matter with putting in an hour or two running down the drayman who helped on this job?"

Bob covered considerable territory by daylight. He interviewed eight patrolmen, three hackmen and two night expressmen.

He ran his man pretty close. Drays were going out of fashion, there were not many licensed vehicles of that description, and Bob was pretty sure that he could put his hand on the dwarf's helper before noon.

"He'll have to tell where he delivered the steel safe," calculated Bob. "That's a new starter. Hello! here is the street the dwarf lives in."

Bob put down it, with no particular idea of passing the dwarf's recent place of abode. That would be the last point in the world the dwarf would be likely to visit for a good long time to come.

As Bob neared it, however, he noticed quite a stir in its vicinity, and as a man passed him who seemed to belong in the neighborhood, he hailed him.

"Oh, my friend!" spoke Bob, "do you happen to know a man named Wickham?"

"The dwarf?"

"Yes."

"Everybody knows him hereabouts."

"I suppose you haven't seen him since last night?"

The man stared curiously at Bob.

"Why, yes," he responded, slowly, "I just saw him."

Bob started up with a thrill.

"What's that!" he cried—"you just saw him?"

"Yes."

"Where? Where?"

The man pointed to the house Bob had visited the night previous—the dwarf's lodging place.

"You mean to say Wickham is at home, in there?" demanded Bob, getting excited.

"I said so. I'm not in the habit of lying," answered the man, quite affronted.

"Excuse me—meant no harm," said Bob, hurriedly.

He put for the house in question at full tilt.

Here was luck! The dwarf was at home! What bold game was he playing?

No matter—he was there, that was enough for Bob, who felt like a man who has dug up a lost treasure from the bottom of the sea.

"Maybe he's planted the safe, and is just getting ready to slide himself," theorized Bob. "It's early yet, and he may not calculate on an alarm till the lawyer arrives at his office."

Bob noticed two women standing bare-headed across the street from the house he was making for, and regarding it closely.

Two men came out of it just then, too, and passed him. They were talking in low, serious tones, and the dwarf's name was mentioned.

"Oh!" challenged Bob, "one word, gentlemen; is Mr. Wickham at home, do you know?"

"He is," nodded one of the men, gravely. "We just carried him in."

"Carried him!" repeated Bob, a little mystified, "why——"

Bob stopped there.

In a flash the ominous silence of the women, the serious tones of the men conveyed a new intelligence.

For, chancing to look again at the dwarf's dwelling, Bob saw a woman come out.

It was the dwarf's landlady, and she held a black something that fluttered as she put it on the door knob.

It was a streamer of crape.

CHAPTER VII.

CHASING A CLUE.

Bob's heart sank as he glided up to the woman who was affixing the badge of mourning.

"Who is that for?" he asked.

"It's poor Mr. Wickham. Oh, what a shock! Went away in perfect health last night. This morning——"

From agitation or grief the woman broke down here and buried her face in her apron.

Bob slipped past her into the house, saw several persons grouped near a doorway, and reaching it peered at what they were looking.

Upon a stretcher, half covered with a sheet, lay the dwarf. Bob saw instantly that he was dead.

A depressing conviction stole over him that in this unexpected turn of the case was comprised the worst complication yet.

The dwarf was dead—perhaps his secret and the steel safe's secrets had died with him!

"How did it happen?" Bob asked of the person nearest to him.

"Run down by an electric car. The men who brought him say he was crossing the street in a very happy mood. About two o'clock this morning, absorbed in talking to himself, and laughing and snapping his fingers jovially, and all that, and never noticed the car. The fender struck his temple—killed him instantly. They traced him by his card."

Bob looked serious and awed. The dwarf had bestowed the safe somewhere. Exultant in the conviction of having a fortune within his grasp, he was hurrying to hide himself, when he had been cut down as by a thunderbolt.

They had removed the torn, muddied coat from the victim of the accident. Bob noticed it where it had been carelessly thrown toward a chair, missing it, and slipping to the floor.

He sat down on the chair. Shielded by those who were facing the litter, and suggesting the summoning of an undertaker, a coroner, the dwarf's employer, Lawyer Burt, and the like, Bob went through the pockets of the garment in a flash.

A little memorandum book was all it contained of any interest to him. The minute he got it Bob left the room and the house.

He gave it a quick but general scan after turning the first corner.

The book proved a disappointment of the biggest kind. It contained nothing but formal, methodical business notes—not a clue to the associates, resorts, and private doings of the dead man.

Bob stood still on the public street rubbing his head thoughtfully.

He felt himself in deep waters, in muddy waters. He had handled many peculiar cases in his brief detective experience, but nothing approximating the present one in point of baffling uncertainty.

"The steel safe is the key to the situation," he soliloquized finally—"it's the one thing now tangible in the case. With it I can call the turn on all hands, without it the affair has no bottom or substance. Queer! every time I make a move something checkmates me. First the girl drops out of the game, then the dwarf. I wouldn't be surprised, the curious way affairs had somersaulted, if the drayman has bolted—safe and all."

Around that individual, to Bob's way of thinking, now centred the vital issues of the case.

He took out and consulted a list of a dozen persons. It comprised the names and addresses of city draymen, who, according to the patrolmen, hackmen, and expressmen Bob had consulted early that morning, might answer to the description of the one the dwarf had employed.

Bob snatched a bit of breakfast at the first restaurant he came to.

Then he hailed a cab and directed the driver to the nearest point on his list.

Paul Moore, Custom House place; W. F. Egan, Fourteenth street; William Marzen, West Tyler street. Bob explored this group, to find its members not at all resembling the dwarf's helper.

Number four, number five, number six—where the men had gone to work already, a brief conversation with wife, children or friends convinced Bob that they were not worth running down.

Number seven—John Geary, Miller Court—Bob's patient quest was at last rewarded.

He knew it, as leaving the cabman at the curb and knocking at the open door of a little cottage, a chance glance inside showed a framed crayon portrait over a wooden mantelshelf.

"Found him—it's my man!" muttered Bob.

A glance down the yard showed a dray with one wheel off, and it lying broken on the ground.

The man must, therefore, be at home. Bob made a previously understood signal

to the cabman, who drove at once out of sight of the house.

"Yes, sir—what is it, sir?" inquired a worn-faced woman, approaching the door in response to Bob's knock.

"I am looking for the drayman."

"My husband?"

"Mr. Geary."

"If it's a load, sir, you'll have to leave an order for to-morrow. His dray is out of repair."

"It's no order," prompted Bob. "I wish to see Mr. Geary on a matter of private business."

"He's not well, sir," said the woman, very anxiously.

"It is important that I meet him at once," declared Bob.

"I'll see," murmured the woman, and she crossed the room, and knocked at a door. "John! John!"

"Well, what is it?" inquired a gruff voice beyond.

"There is some one here to see you."

"It is not a humpbacked fellow—the one I told you about?"

"No."

"Maybe he comes from him. I'll see him."

"I'll come right in without ceremony, then," deftly put in Bob.

He executed very cleverly the manœuvre of pressing the woman from the door, turning its knob, skimming the threshold, reclosing the door, and standing with his back against it, confronting a man half dressed and just arising from a bed.

Bob recognized him at once—it was the drayman who had helped the dwarf overcoat the safe and drop him into the walled-in court.

"Know me, Mr. Geary?" projected Bob, simply.

The drayman, getting up, fell back on the bed—from glaring angrily and suspiciously at an intruder, he took to goggling and gaping at what he must have considered a stern, accusing presence, for his face turned all shades, with a sickly, sallow hue predominating.

"Who—who sent you?" he gasped.

"No one. I came myself," announced Bob promptly. "Mr. Geary, this is business, and you will do well to attend to it frankly and promptly. You undoubtedly recognize me as a person you treated

none too courteously at an early hour this morning."

The drayman was a big, burly fellow, and could have crushed Bob with one grip of his brawny hands, but he presented so pitiable a spectacle of craven weakness at Bob's words that the latter actually felt sorry for him.

He began to tremble and his flesh shook like a jelly; great beads of cold sweat mottled his face like drops of rain; his teeth chattered.

"That dwarf!" he groaned in a lost tone. "Oh, I wish I had never had anything to do with him!"

"What! when you get a thousand dollars for an hour's work?" railed Bob, catching the undervoiced comment.

"Me? never, sir!" quavered the drayman, "I solemnly assure you not a dollar, not a cent!"

"Oh, you missed connections, then?" suggested Bob shrewdly.

The man sat back, collapsing. Bob decided that somewhere along the line the dwarf's plans had miscarried. He made a very bold play upon the fears of the wretched drayman.

"Mr. Geary," he said, soberly, "do you realize that you are in something of a box?"

"I do, but I'm not to blame. See here, I am hired to move a safe. I move it, that's all, like any other teamster."

"What! at midnight, other people's property, and incidentally chloroforming a messenger of the law and dropping him fifty feet from nowhere?"

"Say!" chattered the drayman, getting more scared than ever, "are you a—a——"

"I come direct from the highest police authority in America," declared Bob impressively.

"Then—then I'm lost!" fairly wailed the drayman. "Oh, that I was ever induced to depart from straight, honest toil! That scoundrel, that deceiver, the dwarf—I'll—I'll choke the life out of him!"

"You won't!"

"I will!"

"He's dead."

"What!"

The drayman sank back here as if his very doom had been pronounced.

"The dwarf is dead," pursued Bob, steadily. "That means the shifting to your shoulders of the entire responsibility of stealing a safe from Lawyer Burt's office."

"It's awful—I'm doomed!" groaned the drayman. "And I didn't get a cent! Dead! the dwarf dead—then where's the safe?"

"That," stated Bob Ferret concisely, "is exactly what I have come to find out."

CHAPTER VIII.

CABOOSE NO. 27.

The drayman looked scared, surprised, bewildered, at the sharp, clear statement of the young detective.

"Why," he declared, "I don't know where the steel safe is."

"What!" cried Bob, incredulously.

"I don't!"

"You took it somewhere?"

"Of course, but the dwarf sent me off on a fool chase, and when I returned he was gone, and the steel safe gone, and—"

"Put on the rest of your clothes!"

Bob spoke to the drayman as if he was a full-grown man, yet the latter obeyed like a child, for a full-grown man's energy and purpose infused Bob's face, Bob's words and Bob's manner.

"I suppose it's jail for me!" almost whimpered the drayman.

"Not if you tell the truth."

"Do you mean it?"

"I mean," promised Bob, succinctly, "that if you trace out your doings with that safe and the dwarf at once, squarely, holding nothing back, that you shall not be troubled for the share you have taken in this affair."

"Oh, won't I! Say, thank you! thank you! Oh, I'll crawl to the place if you say so!" cried the extravagantly delighted and relieved drayman, almost dancing with joy, as he hurried on his clothes.

Bob signaled the cab, as they got to the street, and it drove up. The drayman looked suspicious.

"You surely mean what you promised?" he asked, uneasily.

"Every word of it," assured Bob. "Driver, this gentleman will tell you just where to go, square by square."

"All right, sir."

The cab proceeded to the street passing the office of Lawyer Burt.

Like a person going over the ground of a recent tragedy, and step by step illustrating its progress, the drayman recovered the course of the steel safe during the early morning hours.

"We came out by way of the alley," he explained. "Down this street here we turned. I don't know where the dwarf was making for, but here we stopped."

"What!" ejaculated Bob, "in the middle of these railroad tracks?"

Cab and inmates had come to the centre of a great switchyard.

"Right here," declared the drayman, positively. "Why, my left wheel struck that switch and got wrenched. I turned too quick and off it came."

"Oh, I see," murmured Bob.

"The dwarf," narrated the drayman, "got frantic as the safe slid to the ground. We saw the yard watchmen's lanterns in the distance. Then he suggested a plan. An old car stood nearby. Its door was open. We lifted the safe into the car. He popped in after it. 'See here,' says he, 'hurry home with your broken dray, get another vehicle, and hurry back. Two thousand dollars if you get me safe to where I want to go inside of an hour!' I got home, I borrowed a wagon from a neighbor, came back here, and—pfft!"

The drayman threw up his hands expressively with the ejaculation.

"What does that mean?" inquired Bob.

"Gone."

"Who—the dwarf?"

"Yes."

"And the safe?"

"Yes, and the safe."

"And the car——"

"Gone too!"

"What!"

"All—all vanished."

"Oh, come now! You can make me believe you two lugged a quarter ton safe all over the city, for I have the evidence of my senses, but you can't stuff me with any such nonsense as the dwarf hauling off a twenty-two thousand-pound car!" declared Bob, vehemently.

"I didn't say he did. I said it was gone. I'm telling you the truth, all the

truth, nothing but the truth. 'There my story ends. That's all I know.'"

Bob believed the man, and Bob was disappointed—more than that, worse puzzled than ever.

He alighted and made the drayman alight with him.

"Now, then," he said, "show me where the car stood—the exact spot."

"Right on this track. Here's the bumper. It rested right at the end of the switch—an old, unused red painted car. A caboose car—No. 27."

"Eh?" exclaimed Bob, "you know its number?"

"Why, certainly," declared the drayman in surprise. "We people are particularly noticeable of numbers and names—it's the training of our trade."

"Caboose No. 27? You are sure?" persisted Bob, and he felt that he had found a strong clue, indeed.

"I would swear to it."

"That's all."

Bob metaphorically rolled up his sleeves, preparatory for some hot work.

The man tried to talk with him, but Bob waved him aside, paying the cabman and ordering him to drive Geary home.

He looked over the yard; a hundred tracks, a thousand cars, a labyrinth, a network, confusing, elaborate—but Bob took it in like a map.

For two hours he went in and out this and that line of cars, in and out this and that office and switch house.

Then Bob proceeded to the train dispatcher's department.

He had engaged in an engrossing search, and with some results.

Very confident was he that Caboose No. 27 had left the yards early that morning with the little steel safe aboard.

He theorized, judging from the time of the dwarf's accident, that the latter must have left it unguarded in the car while he hastened after the drayman to hurry him up, or to get a drink, or a cigar.

One thing was sure. Caboose No. 27 had been in the yard up to two o'clock in the morning.

At three the night watchman whom Bob interviewed, noticed that it was gone from a place where it had been standing for over two weeks.

Bob saw an official in the general

offices. He plainly told him who he was. The mention of Nick Carter's name was all potent to unlock the official's lips and make it an avowed pleasure to help Bob out all he could.

He gave Bob a chair. Then by telephone, telegraph, speaking tube and messenger he called into active service all the intricate machinery of a great railway system.

He approached the eager young detective with a rather blank face half an hour later.

"Sorry," he announced, "but we can't get a clear record—Caboose No. 27 has disappeared from the service."

"Eh!" muttered Bob, aghast.

"Caboose No. 27 was ordered taken up by a train at two this morning—a freight running to Springfield. It was in bad order, and we were going to put it in shop for repairs."

Bob looked interested, but uneasy.

"To make a long story short," continued the official, "a wire to Springfield answers back 'No. 27 is lost.'"

"Lost?" cried Bob—"a car lost!"

"Yes. Ah! think that strange? What do you suppose we have car finders for? Yes, young man, somewhere in the hundred and eighty-seven miles stretch between Chicago and Springfield, Caboose No. 27 has disappeared."

"But——"

"I have wired every station on the line. They return one uniform reply."

"And that is?" asked Bob.

"No trace!"

CHAPTER IX.

FOUND!

No trace!

That was the railroad official's report on lost Caboose No. 27 at eight o'clock in the morning on Tuesday.

"Found!"

That was the inspiring, soul-stimulating word that broke from Bob Ferret's lips at exactly the same hour Thursday.

Only it was eight o'clock in the evening now, a clear moonlit night—night amid a scene indescribably wild, a spot reached by Bob after a day of such probing inquiry, tramping and study as he had rarely gone through.

When the amazing announcement was made by the railway official that somewhere between Chicago and Springfield the car in question had vanished as completely as if dropped out of existence, Bob expressed the rarest surprise.

He soon learned, however, that such occurrences were very frequent, and that professional car finders were kept busy all the year round looking for cars that got mixed in with those of other roads, forgotten on some siding, absorbed by private companies.

Bob talked with one or two of these professionals. After listening to the narrative of a quest for a stray freight car that was chased from one end of the country to the other, of the lost gondola car of a Florida railway that was finally discovered way up at the end of a branch siding in the Canadian woods, Bob decided that his task was a comparatively easy one, for he was fresh on the trail, and that trail was comprised within a limited scope of territory.

He went over the stretch of road between the two cities four times between Tuesday and Thursday. By noon of the last-named day he had narrowed down some certainties.

From conversation held with various train crews, with switchmen, station men, Bob became convinced that somewhere between two stations known as Tracy and Hopeville, Caboose No. 27 had left the train.

At five o'clock in the afternoon Bob had made a second important discovery and was working it up promptly.

This was the fact that the freight train having Caboose No. 27 at its end had switched off a few hours after leaving Chicago on a little unused spur, to allow the Southern Limited to pass.

He saw clearly how, in the darkness, with a sleepy train crew, attending to the track ahead, a violent bump on the old, uneven rails of the siding might have loosened the couplings unnoticed.

At all events, Bob started along the spur. To his entire satisfaction he noticed that the signs of disturbed rust and run-over vines and grasses continued far beyond the track space the switched freight had occupied.

"Something has gone over here with-

in a short time," declared Bob, and he was right.

Up and down went the road bed. There were places where the ties were rotted to punk, where the rails were sprung, but evidences of their being recently used continued.

The tracks rounded a group of abandoned quarry pits, ran to the edge of a dozen others, all overgrown with verdure, and ended at the top of a slant terminating at a lively-flowing little stream.

There Bob came upon his reward—at the side of the rails lay the trucks of a car, with bolts and standards bearing marks of violent usage.

He flared a match, for it was night and surrounding trees shut out the refulgent moon—he bent over the mass of wreckage.

Then one exultant word left his satisfied lips in an intense, though suppressed cheer:

"Found!"

Upon the woodwork above the axles Bob traced a magical number—it marked the axles as well—"27."

"It's part of the car I'm after!" declared Bob positively. "It was run here. Why? Who by? Caboose No. 27 was not lost, but stolen, but—by whom, and where is the rest of it?"

Bob saw where the trees and bushes of the slant looked as if a cyclone had recently passed over them.

He pressed forward palpitatingly, to come to an abrupt halt.

"Easy!"

Easy it might be for the challenger, a man half sheltered by a vine-covered tree, but tremendously difficult for Bob, to imagine what he was doing here, and why he pointed a cocked pistol squarely at his head.

"Friend or foe?" came a second sharp utterance.

"Friend to who? foe to what?" pounded Bob bluntly.

"You look all right," followed in less belligerent accents. "Safer to talk over here. Come."

He beckoned to Bob as he stepped away from the edge of the slant, and, wondering what all these curdling and mysterious manoeuvres might signify, Bob fearlessly followed him.

Making out the man more plainly, Bob saw a shrewd-featured, keen-eyed fellow of about thirty.

"Now, what?" he projected practically.

"This," retorted the man, boring Bob with a very inquisitive eye—"I'm Bowker."

"Are you?"

"Bowker of Macaupin."

"All right, Bowker of Macaupin, go ahead," directed Bob.

"What!" cried the man, disappointedly—"that don't tell you anything?"

"Except what it says."

"Maybe this will help."

The man threw back his coat. Bob smiled. A badge big as a saucer announced that the fellow was a "private detective."

"Guess now?" he insinuated.

"I see you are an officer," replied Bob.

"That's it."

"But why you are lurking here, and stopping peaceable citizens with a drawn revolver, I don't see."

"Why!" exclaimed the man, "I'm after them!"

"After who?"

Bowker pointed down the river.

"Aren't you looking for the crowd yonder, too?"

"Is there a crowd there?" queried Bob.

"Is there! I've been watching them for three nights."

"What for?"

But here the man's lips shut like clam shells on the subject under discussion. When he opened them it was to remark more guardedly:

"Suppose you show up, now?"

"That's simple," observed Bob. "A car was stolen from the siding here—a caboose. There are its trucks. I'm trying to trace up the rest of it."

"Oh! that's it?" brightened up Bowker. "Sort of fellow professional! That's all right. I know where your car is."

"You do?"

"Certainly."

"Good for you!"

"Tell you how it is. You have heard of the Lincoln grave robbers?"

"You mean the persons who attempted

to rob the ex-president's vault at Springfield."

"That's it."

"That was years ago."

"I know it, but they never caught the fellows. I'm new at this business, and want to make a record. No little penny-pinches for me! Give me the glory of a truly historical case! A few days ago I ran across half-a-dozen of the toughest mortals camping down the river there you ever saw. I've been spotting them ever since. They've been hiding in a cave for months. That's suspicious on the start, isn't it now?"

"It is, for a fact."

"I am satisfied that one of them is Budd Martin, the ring-leader in the Lincoln grave robbery, who was never caught."

"That's something worth while."

"About your car. These fellows found it on the siding, Tuesday. Ran it here, disabled it, slid the box down the slant, floated it to their island cave, and there they've set it, a ready-made, to-hand house, snug and cozy as a cabin built to order."

Bob warmed up gratefully to the simple-hearted amateur who had not only guided but warned him.

"Look here," he said. "You saw them steal the car?"

"I did, from a distance."

"Did you see them take anything out of it?"

The man gave a start.

"Why, say!" he exclaimed, "come to think of it, I did."

"What?"

"I don't know, but they ran their raft down here, and lugged and tugged at something till they got it aboard. I thought it was a stove."

Bob studied his companion a minute or two, and then mentally prospected the situation ahead.

If the men Bowker had told about had taken the safe to their island quarters, it was to break it open. If they had broken it open, they had found that which they would fight pretty fiercely to retain.

Bob summed up the situation coherently, decided what he would do, and did it.

"Mr. Bowker," he said, wisely remembering that the Macaupin man knew

the crowd and their habitat, and he did not, "I wish to engage your valuable detective services."

Bowker braced up wonderfully, and made a great showing of badge and revolver.

"That stove you saw was a safe."

"No!"

"A stolen safe in a stolen car. I want to know what these people have done with it."

"You do? Dead easy. Looking for Budd Martin's face under the whiskers and wrinkles of years is a hard thing, but a safe, a big safe—I'll fix that for you."

"You propose——"

"To get to the island. It's hard to reach, they're a watchful crowd, but I just studied out how I'd get there, and made the preparations to do so this very hour."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes. Come down to the stream. I guess they're settled in camp for the night."

Bob followed Bowker down the slant. The latter pointed along the moonlight-glinted expanse of water.

"See where the river widens?" he asked.

Bob nodded.

"The island?"

"Yes."

"Regular mountain formation. Ah! you can catch an occasional flare—that's their camp fire. There's only one way to reach them—right into the cave where the camp fire fronts. You can't scale or drop from behind."

"You intend to try it?"

"With you. Can you swim?"

"Like a fish."

"Got lots of patience?"

"Heaps."

"I've figured and figured over it," pursued Bowker, "how I'd reach them, and get a close view of the man I suspect. They've always got some fellow on the watch, and I about gave it up. This morning I got an inspiration. I've found a mighty clear way to get right near them."

"Good."

"So near you can hear and see everything."

"Better still."

"And when they're off guard, step right in among them."

"Best of all! How are you going to do it?"

"Look here."

Bowker proceeded to where a depression showed in the bank, covered with a pile of heaped-up leaves.

Brushing these aside, he pointed down.

"There you are," he announced triumphantly.

"Watermelons!" cried the astonished Bob Ferret.

CHAPTER X.

IN CLOSE RANGE.

"Watermelons they are," smiled back Bowker.

"I don't see——"

"You will soon. Railroad bridge a mile up stream. Car going over the bridge got smashed in a collision. Loaded with melons—half a dozen hundred dozen must have been dumped into the river."

"Well?"

"They've been floating down ever since. When I got my idea, I caught a few of the biggest ones. These are they. See that, and that—how's that?"

"It's great!" announced Bob, as Bowker turned over several of the melons with his foot.

Bob had little faith in fanciful experiments, none at all in venturesome monkey-tricks, but he imagined that he saw some real utility in the amateur detective's plan, far-fetched as it seemed at first flush.

The melons had been hollowed out so as to form a large and roomy receptacle for a human head.

At one end a series of holes had been so skilfully bored that five feet away no one could detect the fact.

"You can hear, see and breathe in those, eh?" jubilated Bowker.

"It looks so," admitted Bob.

"You can wade, float swim. Why! we can creep right up to that island camp without those fellows ever guessing it."

"When do we start?"

"Now it as good a time as any. It's getting on toward nine o'clock, isn't it? They bunk in pretty early. One of them

went away at noon, but I think he's back by this time."

Bob took all due precaution to rid himself of superfluous clothing that would be hampering in any way.

He felt like a diver in his mailed head-piece, as he stepped into the water, slipped the hollowed-out melon over his head, and saw its bobbing mate follow suit.

"You lead," he called out.

Bowker crossed to the other bank, and this they lined erect, their vegetable helmets in their hands, until they came to where the river broadened.

There was quite a stretch to cross. Bob could plainly see the isolated haunt of the crowd Bowker had described.

The latter gave him a few sensible directions as to their course and method of procedure.

Then began for Bob the strangest and most sensational adventure he had ever encountered.

The river was not very deep, except in the middle. Here they had to swim.

Approaching the island, they waded, keeping out from the shore just the right distance to be enabled to give a correct floating semblance to the melons.

Bob could plainly make out the island camp now.

The island itself was a huge mountain of rock, and perpendicular.

At one end it concaved, and at the edge of this cove was presented a half-circular sweep of cavernous formation.

Near its edge stood the scarred and battered object of Bob's recent ardent quest—Caboose No. 27.

In removing the trucks and conveying it thither one end had got stove in, and it had not been repaired yet, but from pans, kettles and bunks that already littered the interior, Bob saw that the refugees intended to make a cozy winter home of it.

A camp fire burned in front of it and the cavern entrance. It showed three men seated on stools around a squarely sawed tree stump, industriously playing cards.

Bowker's melon head came up close to the young detective's melon head, and Bob ventured a question.

"Is your man there?"

"The supposed Budd Martin?"

"Yes."

"Don't see him. He may be out of sight, asleep. Now, then, we're going to get nearer."

"Is it safe?" questioned Bob.

"A little nearer is. We came here to look and listen."

Bob noticed that the cove water, out of the current and still, stayed the progress of bits of driftwood, and the like that floated within its range.

When he had bobbed and tilted a little farther on in true watermelon fashion, therefore, he got tired of kneeling and crouching, for the place was shallow, and sat down on a smooth, submerged boulder.

The melon came just to the surface, and the apertures in it Bob found to be excellent peep holes.

Bowker planted himself a few yards away. So far, the men at the tree stump had not apparently noticed them.

Bob felt that he was in a peculiar ridiculous and perilous situation combined. Still, he took advantage of every moment afforded him for scanning the men and their environment.

He could see nothing of the safe, but he knew it was there, as one of the men playing at cards arose, and as he did so, disturbed what had served as the cushion of his stool.

"It's the burlap covering the dwarf put over the safe," guessed Bob. "I wish those fellows would quit smoking and go to talking."

The fellow who had just risen left his companions to finish the game, and amused himself by throwing a narrowed-down carving knife at the middle of the big white paint dot that came after the "27" on the red side of the caboose car.

He missed it as often as he struck it, and the two at the stump, concluding their game, set off a roar of derision as twice in succession the knife point quivered in a board six inches away.

"What you laughing at?" the man demanded in a nettled tone.

"At you," answered one of his comrades, a big, clumsy mass of fatness, getting to his feet and picking up a hatchet that lay by the side of a heap of driftwood.

"I suppose you could do better?" sneered the knife thrower.

"I could every time, even with a blunt-edged tool like this. Once!"

The middle of the dot dented like a nutburr cracked open.

"Twice!"

It blurred, all a-splinter.

"Three times!"

The hatchet wiped the paint period out of being, and split the board half a foot down.

"How's that?" crowed the successful marksman.

"Huh! It's no great shakes. Couldn't miss is, with that big tool. What's a six-foot throw!"

"Six feet, eh?" cried the expert.

"Say! I could do it at sixty. Here—stand aside. There's a mark for your life. If I don't hit and split, first crack, put me down for brag and bluster after this."

"That watermelon?"

"The farthest one out."

"Great goodness!" quivered the appalled Bob. "He's aiming at me!"

CHAPTER XI.

"ALL RIGHT."

The hatchet was started for Bob's head before he had time to think.

He saw it coming, and he struggled to dive, drop, anything—to get beyond range of the terrible marksman.

Bob only ducked, but it saved him. The hatchet struck the melon aslant, and slicing it clean, dangerously near to Bob's scalp, split it clear in two and plumped into the water with a splash.

A roar of amazement rang out, as the two halves of the scooped out melon fell apart, revealing a human head.

Click — click — click — prompt men these! Bob faced a row of gleaming weapons.

"Walk ashore!"

Bob calculated his chances. He was an expert swimmer, and diver, but he could not beat a speeding bullet.

"In the name of the law——"

"Zounds!"

"I should say so!"

The attention of the three men was diverted to a new figure.

Rising from the water grandly, Bowker stretched out a commanding arm.

If he had removed his vegetable helmet, he might have appeared impressive. As it was, he was simply ridiculous.

"Another one! You walk ashore, too."

"Bowker of Macaupin!" came from behind the green, dripping mask.

"If I wasn't sure this fellow was a lunatic, I'd say here was something serious——" began the big fellow.

"Lunatic, nothing! Look at that!"

"The people of the State of Illinois command you——" began Bowker, grandly—"wow!"

He had put the point of his finger on his glaring badge, but he snatched it away quickly.

A bullet struck the silver plate and glinted, but Bowker went staggering.

"It's the police! Boys, they've been spotting us!"

"Have you?" demanded the giant of the crowd.

"Maybe!" placidly answered Bowker.

"In the name of the people——"

"Bah!"

Around came the great swinging arm of the huge fellow.

He gave Bowker a blow that swept him with a bang against the caboose.

"Follow him, if you don't want the same!" growled the surly scoundrel to Bob.

This hedged them in twenty feet from the water.

The man who had hurled the hatchet cast a malevolent eye on Bob.

"What brought you here?" he demanded.

"This."

Bob frankly placed his hand on the side of the car.

"Eh?"

"I was tracing up this lost caboose."

"What for?"

"To find what was in it."

"And what was that?"

A malignant hiss underlayed the sentence. The man's wire-like whiskers almost bristled.

Before Bob could answer there was a splashing sound, a rowboat approached, beached, and a man sprang out.

"That's him," whispered Bowker.

"The man you suppose to be the grave robber?"

"Yes."

"Hello! what have we here?"

The newcomer was a man of far greater intellectual calibre than the others, and he spoke with an air of leadership.

"What, indeed, but the police!" growled the big fellow.

"You don't mean it!" ejaculated the newcomer with a start.

"Look at that man's badge. They stole up on us with their heads in floating watermelons. It isn't safe here, Willis."

"It's got to be, for a day or two."

"Risk or no risk?"

"Risk? Who talks of risk!" cried the man designated as Willis, with flashing eyes. "What have you three to fear—two years each. And I? A lifetime. Bah! Be men, not mice—scared at the prying smartness of some backwoods fellows imagining themselves sleuths. See here, boys, I've arranged for the goods."

An eager murmur went the rounds.

"A man will be here to-morrow to appraise the sparklers. We'll soon handle the cash. Then we can't go too quickly, say I. Here, march those two fellows up till I turn them inside out,"

The speaker eyed Bob over keenly.

"Only a boy!" he sneered lightly.

"Now, then, who are you?"

Bowker of Macaupin came up studying the man's face as if he would devour him, and then his own suddenly assumed a crestfallen air.

"I've made a mistake," he muttered, and Bob guessed that the remark appertained to his supposed identification of the man as the fugitive grave robber.

"You have of your life!" nodded the latter. "Here, fill a pipe, boys. No, here's something better."

He leaned over and snipped from Bowker's pocket a metal cigar case.

It must have been a pretty tight receptacle, for as he took from it the single cigar it contained Bob observed that it was perfectly dry.

He lit it and assumed the air of a judge while his comrades ranged themselves at one side, a grim-faced jury.

Bob noticed Bowker start as the cigar began to smoke. Then Bowker's eyes

snapped and he nudged up closer to his fellow prisoner.

"When something happens, lad——" he breathed.

"What's going to happen?"

"When something happens, take what I give you."

"What will you give me?"

"And do as I do, and do the crowd."

"Say——"

"S-st! Be ready for the smash-up!"

Bob was mystified at this singular talk. He could not make out his companion at all, but he knew that something sensational boded.

"Now then, you fellow with the plate——"

"This is a badge, sir—a detective badge," corrected Bowker.

"It'll do for your coffin. Do you know who I am?"

"Thought I did."

"And now?"

"I was wrong. I took you for one of the Lincoln grave robbers."

"You're on the wrong lay," nodded the man, easily. "Boys," to his friends, "these two simpletons mean no particular harm. I guess we'll just hive them up till we get ready to leave!"

"No!" pronounced the giant fellow hoarsely, and "No! no!" came as forcibly from the other two.

"Won't have it, eh? Slit your own weazands, then. I'll have no hand in it. Eh?" as one of them whispered to him, and he looked with new interest at Bob—"was you on the track of this car?"

"I said so," answered Bob, boldly.

"And the—what it had in it?"

"Just."

"Why?"

"I was sent."

"Who by?"

"In the first place, the railroad company."

"Ah! that!"—and Willis snapped his fingers derisively.

"In the next place," and Bob fixed his eye steadily on the man, "by Nick Carter."

"What?"

"Let's get out!"

"Should say so!"

"The deuce!"

Upon every member of the quartet

that name produced an effect of dismay and alarm.

Bob felt very greatly pleased. The fame of Nick Carter had penetrated every corner of the land, the terror of Nick Carter might be used as an instrument to frustrate the designs of these fellows.

"See here, my friends," spoke up Bob persuasively, "I represent Nick Carter, and he's a hard one to beat. The contents of that safe he will hold you responsible for. You won't enjoy them long, if you take them. Give them up, and go your ways, whoever you are, we won't trouble you."

"Well! the cheek!"

"I don't know about that," muttered Willis.

The last speaker's face was decidedly thoughtful.

He took a long, reflective puff at the cigar, and seemed to be turning Bob's proposition over in his mind.

"It's coming!" whispered Bowker to Bob, excitedly.

"What is?"

Bang!

The catastrophe was precipitated.

There was a report, a flash, a flare.

The cigar that the leader of the desperadoes had taken from Bowker was a loaded one.

Now it had gone off.

"Quick!" spoke Bowker, edging right up to Bob.

"Quick, what?" projected the latter.

"Take these."

Bob observed that his companion had groped quickly to his breast pocket.

Out he had whipped a waterproof rubber bag.

He tore its mouth clasp loose and palmed the contents—a dozen objects big as walnuts and incased in tissue paper.

"What are they?" asked Bob, as half of them were forced into his hand.

"Use them and see."

"How?"

"As I do."

This snappy colloquy had been permitted by the fact that the explosion of the cigar had thrown the desperado quartet into a natural state of confusion.

The eyes of the leader had got full of ashes and tobacco, and the others crowded around him to see if he was hurt.

Then with a roar the giant fellow turned to vent upon Bowker the resentment due such an indignity as playing a trick on their leader.

"Zounds! we'll smash you!" he roared.
Snap!

"Give it to them!" shouted Bowker to Bob.

"What are they?"

"Torpedoes!"

Snap—snap.

"Red pepper torpedoes!"

Snap!

"My own invention. See 'em squirm! And holler. Bully boy! Ha! ha! In the name of the people of the State of Illinois I command you—whoop!"

A cyclone of action, the redoubtable Bowker had done what Bob recognized as "a big thing."

His unique melon ruse and loaded cigar had not exhausted his farcical equipment.

The tissue paper objects were torpedoes, and "terrors!" The first landed on the giant's forehead, exploded, scattered, and he tumbled down as if struck by lightning.

Raining the other torpedoes—Bob quickly catching the idea—the bombardment was the most effective the young detective had ever seen.

Filled with red pepper, this fell over the quartet in a cloud. The minute it filled their eyes they were helpless—the minute mouths and nostrils were penetrated they became a howling, wriggling, half-crazed set.

Bowker dodged in and out among them, and Bob helped. From grasp, belt and pocket they removed the weapons of the blinded group.

From his own wonderful pockets Bowker drew out an object that made Bob wonder if a couple of crowbars would not come next!

It was a fine steel chain, to which delicate but strong handcuffs were attached.

Gingerly, deftly, these were snapped on the wrists of one after the other of the desperadoes.

Bob ran into the cavern and explored it. He came out with a beaming face.

"Found your safe?" asked Bowker.

"I did—split open."

"And the contents?"

"Here."

Bob proudly touched a big package under one arm.

Bowker asked him to watch the men till he rowed down to Hopeville.

The quartet stared, glared and flared at their boy guardian when they got so they could look out of the corners of their inflamed eyes.

Bowker came back in an hour on a little steam yacht.

It contained, besides himself, half a dozen local police officers.

"Hello!" ejaculated the Hopeville sheriff the minute he landed.

"What?" asked Bowker.

"You've made a big catch!"

"Have I?"

"Rather. It's the Dockrill gang—one of them's a lifer. They escaped eight months ago from the Jefferson City penitentiary. There's a thousand dollars reward on this poet-looking leader alone."

Bowker of Macaupin was one big smile of pride and exultation.

"I'm not so worse as a detective, eh?" he propounded to Bob, smilingly.

"You've done me a big turn, and made Nick Carter your friend for life," answered Bob, warmly.

"That's worth more than all of the rest of it," declared Bowker.

"Yes, Mr. Bowker," continued Bob, "you're kind of given to red fire, red pepper and stage effects generally, but the way it's turned out, you're essentially and indisputably—all right!"

CHAPTER XII.

A BRAVE FINISH.

"Stop!"

Chicago again and the vicinity of the office of Lawyer Burt again, and Bob Ferret in a cab ordering a sharp halt.

He had just been from the recluse home where he had inquired about Miss Ethel Morse, to find that she was convalescent.

Bob had next started for Burt's office. He had the diamonds, the documents that covered the case—now to dig out its motives and mysteries.

"It's like beginning at the wrong end first," Bob was soliloquizing, when he saw in the hallway of the lawyer's

building, in an attitude of intense dejection, a person who crossed his vision like a phantom.

Out from the cab sprang Bob, and ran promptly up to this person.

If he did not know that Miss Ethel Morse was lying sick in bed, he would have sworn that this was the young lady in male attire!

"The very picture! I never saw such a resemblance," murmured Bob. "Excuse me," he spoke, reaching the young man. "Will you tell me your name?"

The other looked up. He had an aristocratic, expressive face, but seared with gloom and dissipation.

"Why should I?" he demanded.

"Is it—Morse?"

"Yes."

"Have you a sister—a Miss Ethel Morse?"

"Yes, a twin sister."

"And you are in trouble?"

"Who are you?" resented young Morse.

"Never mind. I am a friend—hers and yours."

"I am in trouble."

"With the lawyer who has an office up stairs?"

"Silas Burt, yes."

"I thought so. Is he in his office now?"

"No, he has just left the city."

Bob reflected rapidly. The young man's face was dejected. He spoke the lawyer's name bitterly. Bob fitted together the pieces of a possible theory. Then he said:

"I want to tell you something."

He told young Morse all—from start to finish. He was giving away valuable information on a risk, but he believed it was a wise move.

From wonder to alarm, and this to admiration, gratitude and excitement, the young man's face became a vivid playground of varied emotions.

"Oh!" he cried. "Why did I not know this two hours ago!"

"Why?" demanded Bob.

"I will tell you all. My twin sister and I resided with General Warren Morse. He has been in Europe for six months. After he left, I got in with a bad crowd—this man Burt among them.

"I got playing cards. After a wild night. Burt showed me several notes bearing my uncle's name.

"He claimed I had passed them in as stakes in a game—that they were forgeries.

"He demanded that I pay them—twenty thousand dollars.

"He went to my sister, and threatened to arrest me and bring her into court as a witness.

"She fled from the house. Society people suppose we are in the White Mountains, summering.

"She, to save me, delivered up the diamonds to Burt.

"To-day he summoned me here. He made me sign a paper, acknowledging those forgeries.

"I suppose he still had the notes and the diamonds.

"I now see that he has gone to Cleveland to sell that confession to my uncle, who, on his way home, is staying a week there with a friend.

"To silence a scandal the general will pay him. Then he will drive myself and poor Ethel from his home!"

"No, he won't!" declared Bob, positively.

"Oh, you give me hope!" cried young Morse. "Listen. I never knew I forged the notes—I must have been intoxicated."

"Yes, Burt drew you in."

"Save me," pleaded Morse, earnestly, and I will never touch wine or cards again!"

"You think Burt has gone to Cleveland?"

"Yes, I saw him consult a time-table. A train leaves at 10:15."

Bob glanced at his watch.

"Ten minutes to intercept him!" he ejaculated. "Mr. Morse, take that card. Go straight to its address—Nick Carter, Palmer House. Wait there till I return."

Slam—snap—went door and whip of the cab.

"Drive for your life!" ordered Bob.

He glanced at the big clock on the front of the depot as he reached it—10:14 1-2. Out he sprang—through the entrance Bob dashed.

Clang! a bell—clang—the crash of the iron guard gates.

Through them Bob saw the Morning Limited for the East just pulling out.

On the observation platform of the last car stood Burt.

"Let me pass—I want that train," Bob ordered to the gateman.

"It's started."

"I can catch it."

"Against rules."

"Not for me!"

Bob was desperate, Bob was resolute.

He sized up the gate, he ran back twenty feet.

"Stop!"

Slam!

Bob darted forward at full speed, lifted himself with a spring and shot through the criss-cross space above the gate like a circus athlete.

A slide, a keen run, a grasp at the polished brass platform rail of the last coach, and Bob had made it.

Burt had re-entered the car. Bob made him out seated at a window.

"Mr. Silas Burt," he spoke, approaching.

"Eh? Yes, that's me."

"You have a document in your pocket that you are taking to Cleveland to sell to General Warren Morse."

"What's that!"

"A document you extorted from a weak young man—a victim of your cunning arts."

"Hold on, there!"

"I want it. Next, you will get off this train at the Twenty-second street station."

"Say, who are you? You young——"

"Detective!" supplied Bob, promptly.

"I come from Nick Carter. Perhaps you have heard of the gentleman?"

The lawyer's eyes dilated.

"He has the contents of your stolen steel safe, diamonds and documents, among them a paper of yours. Mr. Silas Burt, it proves that ten years ago you were a convict in the Mississippi State penitentiary."

Burt almost fell over. His face had grown ashen.

"I'll do as you say," he faltered.

"You will. Give me the paper."

A trembling hand passed over young Morse's confession to the uncompromising Bob.

"Get off this train at Twenty-second street, and never trouble General Morse or his wards again."

"I promise."

"Forget them. Never dare mention the errors into which you led a weak young fellow who is going to reform. If you ever trouble him with a word, a hint, a threat, we unmask you to the public."

It was letting Mr. Silas Burt off light, Bob acknowledged, but he wanted to give young Morse a clear field in which to redeem himself.

Before noon Bob happily closed up a case on which until now he had been working in the dark.

He took young Morse to his sister and he took the documents and the diamonds from the stolen steel safe with him.

Gently he revealed to Miss Ethel Morse that her uncle need never know the terrible ordeal through which they had passed during his absence.

Then, followed by the graceful thanks of two happy souls, Bob Ferret returned to the guiding genius, the veteran detective, whose schooling and direction had enabled him to make a wonderful finish to the wonderful chase involved in Nick Carter's newest mystery.

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